

Like a Child

Matthew 18:1-20

Sunday School begins this weekend, and as we celebrate the faith of children, we also are reminded of how much they need to know. One list of actual Sunday School answers describes children who think unleavened bread is bread without any ingredients, the Egyptians drowned in the desert, and Moses died before he ever reached Canada. Or, when they move to the New Testament, they think that the Golden Rule is do unto others before they do unto you, the epistles are the wives of the apostles, and Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple because they couldn't find a babysitter. If Jesus isn't just telling the disciples that they're cute, or that we're in another episode of disciples say the darndest things, what does it mean to receive Jesus like a child? What did Jesus mean? What did it mean for his disciples in the Gospel lesson? And what does it mean for us today?

Maybe being like a child means having a simple faith. A faith that is content with the Sunday School answer of "Jesus." Dr. Karl Barth was one of the most brilliant and complex theologians of the twentieth century. He wrote volume after massive volume on the meaning of life and faith. But when a young student asked Dr. Barth if he could sum up what was most important about his life's work and theology in just a few words, he just thought for a moment and then smiled, "Yes, in the words of a song my mother used to sing me, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

While "Jesus loves me" is a good song to sing, and it is enough to believe that is the case, that isn't what Jesus is talking about. The disciples haven't been arguing about complex theological distinctions. They hadn't been

breaking out their Old Testament scrolls to cite chapter and verse in their discussions. No, they'd been arguing about who was the greatest. They'd been arguing about who was best, who would get ahead. When Jesus tells them to be like children, he's not telling them to be childish in their knowledge. He's telling them to be like children in their attitudes.

And while Jesus commends simple faith, he does so as a starting point, not an ending point. When the disciples do not understand something, he doesn't just leave them in their ignorance; he teaches them. When Peter misunderstands how Jesus will save the world, Jesus doesn't just say that his simple faith is enough. Jesus tells Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!"

We live in a world that elevates the experience of children. Even though it's been over a century since his first appearance, Peter Pan is still admired as the boy who won't grow up, and in fact gives his name to those suffering from "Peter Pan syndrome," those who can't seem to grow up. Even though the stand alone stores are closed, some people still want to just be a Toys R Us kid. Whole industries, from toy makers to TV shows and more, are focused on children.

That's not how it was in Jesus' day. We think of being a child as a good thing. We think they're cute and cuddly. As work gets stressful and college classes get hard, we may long for the days when we had all of our needs taken care of, when we got to spend time coloring, when we had nap time built into our daily schedules. But that's not how it was in Jesus' day. Children were seen as foolish, lowly, powerless, helpless, and insignificant. In the

first century, there's no other example of children being held up as a positive example.

That's what Jesus means by being like a child. The disciples are arguing about which one of them is the greatest, which of them is the most important, which of them is the most independent. Jesus instead tells them to be unimportant and dependent. A child is dependent on her parents to be fed and changed, cleaned and cared for, and can do nothing to help herself. The disciples needed to realize that they were totally dependent on God, on Jesus.

Like children, we cannot do anything for our own. All that we have has been given to us by God the Father, our creator. We can do nothing to get ourselves out of the dirt and mess of sin that we're trapped in. Left to our own devices, we'd never get free. We are totally helpless.

That's why Jesus came, and that's what the disciples didn't understand. Even in the midst of their misunderstanding, though, Jesus continues on. He's heading out of Galilee, where he's been doing all of his teaching, and heading towards Jerusalem. He's heading towards Jerusalem, towards the cross. He's heading towards Jerusalem to be delivered into the hands of men, and killed. He's headed towards Jerusalem to die on the cross for the sins of the slow-to-understand disciples that are with him. And He's headed towards Jerusalem to die on the cross for the sins of the slow-to-understand disciples that are here today.

We still follow in the ways of those disciples, as much as we don't want to admit it. We're more likely to not understand what we are called to do, and instead focus on what we know how the world works. Like Judas, we turn aside to follow greed and ambition. Like Peter, we turn away when the going gets tough. Like

the other disciples, we head towards lives that lead us to a place of safety and security, but at a cost of not following Jesus.

That's why we're called to turn and be like a child. We need to give up any thought of doing things on our own, and instead approaching God as a child approaches a dear father. It means recognizing our inability to change our condition on our own, and just trusting in God. It means giving up arguing over who is the greatest, and instead recognizing our own insignificance.

Being like children in our faith means recognizing that. We don't believe on our own. The Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in us through hearing the Word and receiving the Sacraments. The Holy Spirit doesn't just work through pastors and Sunday School teachers, though. Faith is sustained through family and friends, as children watch their parents and learn from their faith example.

Now there are those who think that faith is a childish thing. That as you grow up, you should mature out of believing in make believe. But as CS Lewis wrote, "When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty, I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up."

Jesus also points us to children as an example in learning. As Martin Luther said in his preface to the Large Catechism, "I am also a doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I

must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism—and I also do so gladly.” As Sunday School begins, we remember that we are all lifelong students of God, and that we are to never stop learning, never stop growing in our faith.

Jesus finally points us to children as those who see God's kingdom the clearest. They are the ones who see the wonders present around us in God's creation. They are the ones who come to Jesus just as they are. The ones who realize that they are God's children, loved by God, because that's what God does. And that's what God calls us to realize, as well.

We may not always know all the answers to the questions we're asked about faith. We may occasionally think that Noah's wife was Joan of Ark, or forget all of the Ten Commandments. Jesus points us to children as those who see God's kingdom the clearest. They are the ones who come to Jesus just as they are, in humility and dependence and trust. That's a faith worth imitating.

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